

Everglades Restoration Plan Upsets Rural Florida Town

Its residents have little say in buyout

By Mireya Navarro
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Miami

The way some residents tell it, the area on the edge of the Everglades National Park known as East Everglades can have all the charm of a swamp — flooding, mosquitoes, remoteness. But the same residents describe the bright side of the neighborhood as “magical” and “breathtaking.”

“The privacy, the quality of the air, the low noise, the safety, the spiritual contact with nature,” said Jose Exposito, 38, an East Everglades resident and the owner of an orchid business. “It’s just a way of life you don’t find anywhere.”

That way of life is about to end for the area, about 25 miles west of Miami. Exposito’s rural neighborhood, government officials say, stands as one of the obstacles to a comprehensive effort to repair the vast expanse of wetlands that is the Everglades.

Officials of the South Florida Water Management District, the agency that oversees flood protection and water supply for 16 counties, voted last month to spend about \$120 million to buy out the 1,400 landowners in East Everglades area by the year 2002. Those who refuse to sell will have their properties condemned, officials said.

Officials of the water management agency say plans are for most of the area of 6,000 acres to have continuous standing water once the residents are gone, as they try to restore the flow of water to the Everglades National Park.

“This is one of these crucial components” for restoration, said Mark Kraus, conservation director for the Everglades office of the National Audubon Society, “and the people living in the area are victims of circumstance. We support the plan for buyout but we know there’s a human factor here and there ought to be fair treatment including relocation costs.”

Everglades neighbors say money does not begin to compen-



Madeline Fontaine in her back yard in East Everglades, Fla., where the state wants to buy out 1,400 property owners.

sate them for wiping out their homes and businesses, which started developing in the 1950s. The area, an eclectic collection of small farms, ranches and cement-block homes on plots of several acres, oozes self-sufficiency.

There are no government services such as trash collection or door-to-door mail delivery, and if a

promise he said he might not be able to keep somewhere else. And neighbors include Berta and Humberto Valdes, who built their 2,800-square-foot home in 1979 as a haven to raise five sons and had planned to grow mamey trees to support their retirement.

“You can’t compensate 20 years of a lifetime,” said Berta Valdes,

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— JOSE EXPOSITO, East Everglades resident

house should catch fire, residents say, it would probably burn down before firefighters could reach it on the pothole-filled dirt strips they call roads.

But residents say all troubles are forgotten at the sight of an Everglades sunset or with the feeling of independence that comes with their isolation. Among the residents, most of Hispanic descent, are breeders of birds, fish and snakes, growers of tropical crops like mamey, papaya guava, and those who assert their privacy with signs like, “No Trespassing. Sniper on Duty.”

Now, some fences also feature signs reading, “This land and my life are not for sale.”

Businesses include Exposito’s Soroa Orchids, whose motto, “an exquisite encounter with nature,”

48, a teacher. “We did everything right to build our family house, our retirement house. Our future retirement income is gone.”

Just like the Everglades, the community has become a casualty of what Everglades preservationists call a monumental environmental mistake — ditching and draining that started in 1947 as a flood-control project mandated by Congress.

It resulted in the loss of about half of the Everglades’ 4 million acres to agricultural production and urban development and allowed rural communities like East Everglades to spring up even outside flood protection zones.

The project by the Army Corps of Engineers spurred growth in South Florida, which today encom-

passes the state’s most populous counties. But the project also disrupted the natural southward water flow that nourished plants and animals in the protected Everglades and fisheries in Florida Bay, endangering an ecosystem unlike any other in the world.

To try to undo the damage, federal and state officials announced in October the comprehensive \$8 billion plan, which is subject to congressional approval. It calls for reconstructing the flood control system and acquiring land to recapture through new reservoirs and channels most of the fresh water that is now channeled to the sea and to help restore the slow flow of water that seeped across the Everglades for centuries.

For that, government officials

say they need to retake more than 200,000 acres of mostly agricultural land and a few populated tracts, prominent among them East Everglades. The buyout in East Everglades was authorized under restoration efforts that preceded the proposed new plan, said officials of the Army Corps of Engineers.

Many East Everglades residents and their supporters said that as nature lovers they would understand the need to give the land back to the Everglades in order to ensure its health. But many refuse to believe that their displacement is necessary to restore water flow to the park.

The acrimony over the current plan underscores the pain involved in the displacement of hundreds of residents and doubts that

any sale price would ever make them whole again. Many East Everglades homes were rebuilt or underwent major repairs after the area was hit by Hurricane Andrew in 1992.

Hector and Georgina Becero, a retired couple who moved into the area in 1975, spending five years building their house on 2½ acres, where they grow plantains and tangerines, say it will take a court order to get them out. The ashes of her father, who once lived with them, are scattered around the property according to his wishes, the family said.

“I’m 67,” said Becero, a retired salesman. “Do you know what it’s like to have to start over at 67? Can the government pay me for all the hours of work over 23 years?”

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